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US rejects Soviet anthrax claim

By William Beecher
Globe Staff

WASHINGTON — The Carter Administration has decided to reject categorically the Soviet Union's claim that an anthrax epidemic in Sverdlovsk a year ago was caused by tainted meat, not, as Washington suspects, by an accident at a germ warfare plant.

Well-placed officials say that next week diplomats in the American embassy in Moscow probably will press for meetings with senior Soviet biologists to discuss some of the intelligence information that convinces the United States the Russians may be cheating on the 1972 treaty banning the development, production or storage of biological warfare weapons.

"The Russians claim the deaths occurred because of the sale of infected meat," one official said. "That could have caused several deaths, perhaps even a score. But not hundreds. Our evidence is that hundreds died from

airborne pulmonary anthrax in the vicinity of a plant in Sverdlovsk suspected for several years to be making biological weapons."

If the Russians reject the demand for detailed technical discussions, officials say, the United States might bring the matter before the United Nations Security Council. Under the treaty, suspected violations can be brought to the United Nations, which has authority to call for an investigation that all signatories, of which the Soviet Union is one, are pledged to cooperate with.

If the Russians veto such a probe, the United States might then move the matter to the UN General Assembly for a debate and a call for either censure or sanctions.

Sources say that US intelligence in 1975 came up with information suggesting the Russians, rather than dismantling germ warfare plants and destroying stocks, were expanding production facilities in Sverdlovsk, Zagorsk and Omutninsk.

But the evidence was mostly from spy satellite photos and was not regarded as conclusive. Partly to avoid leveling charges that might damage detente, a decision was made not to raise the issue with the Russians at the time.

Since then, the intelligence community has ruled out Omutninsk but concluded that there is a likelihood that a banned substance is being produced at Zagorsk, an open city to which tourists may go, and Sverdlovsk, a closed city.

American intelligence learned about the incident at Sverdlovsk shortly after it occurred in April of last year. But it was not until emigres appeared in the West with confirmatory details within the last month or so that policymakers concluded the case for a germ warfare violation was strong.

So the issue was raised both bilaterally, in Moscow, and at an already scheduled Geneva conference, which was routinely looking into compliance with the treaty.

Officials were pleased that the Russians didn't just stonewall, but rather decided to answer with a formal letter claiming a natural epidemic. But assertions that the disease was transmitted through ingestion of infected meat contradicts specific information the United States has, that it was caused by spores in the air. Even the burning of bad meat, which the Russians did not claim happened, would have destroyed the spores, analysts say.

If the Soviets should fail to come up with a more convincing argument, the United States is considering asking for admission of scientists from neutral countries for an impartial inspection of the suspected facilities.

But some officials are worried that, if the Russians are making biological weapons and toxins at the plant, they might be able to clear out the evidence before inspectors arrive. The United States would then appear silly for having lodged the accusations.

The Central Intelligence Agency is making a study now to determine whether the Sverdlovsk plant could be sanitized quickly, without outside knowledge. If so, no request for an on-site inspection would be made.

"We shouldn't jump ahead of ourselves," one official declared. "Our next step is to request technical discussions to see what more the Russians will offer. Only after seeing their reaction will we be in a position to decide on our next step."

Soviet tanks and armored personnel carriers captured by the Israelis from the Egyptians during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war showed they had been designed to protect their crews against biological, chemical or radiological weapons effects.

The biggest concern of many planners is that the Soviet Union is secretly building up arsenals of both chemical and germ warfare weapons, giving itself the option of using them in the event of a major war in Europe.